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## Hyphenated Identity: Pico Iyer's 'Global Soul' and Transculturation

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Travel has always been a mode of assessment of territory, of knowledge gathering, and of putting a discursive system into place. Post-colonial theory places travel and travel writing as an offshoot of *Imperium* --- the concept which aimed at exploring, appropriating, historicizing, and at times, racinating the explored land from the perspective of the rulers. As an ideological apparatus of the empire, travel writing attempted at “culturizing” the subordinate groups in a dominated nation, basing itself on the premise that the citizens of a dominated nation always tends to internalize the cultural and behavioral traits of the dominator. Marie Louise Pratt in this context formulates the concept of ‘Contact Zones’ (Pratt, 1992) in her work “Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation”. Thus, ‘contact zones’, opines Pratt, “*are social spaces where disparate cultures meet, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination*” (Pratt, 1992). The institutionalization of the western literary canons on the colonies, for instance, is a marked reminder of this fact.

The advent of globalization in the twenty first century has witnessed a parallel movement towards a commodification of culture. It is highly doused in the basic tenets of consumerism and marketability. Under such circumstances, travel writing as a genre has become a motif for cultural re-appropriation, a potent tool for re-placing the periphery into the centre. Travel writing today attempts at unclocking the cultural mysteries of a given place by disassociating it from a pre-perceived outlook. Moreover, more than geographical accounts, travel writing today aims at mapping the territories of the mind while defining the contours of nations and communities and determines forms of cultural and political representations.

Pico Iyer transcends all the tenets of travel writing and in a sense, creates a sub-genre within it. While the post-colonial and the postmodern mind attempts at re-locating the pre-located, re-drawing the boundaries and re-representing the located, Iyer defies all these by presenting himself as a ‘global soul’. He is an “in-between”, a citizen of the “liminal space” (Bhabha, 1994). The liminality in Iyer is internalized as he was born in England to Indian parents, grew up in California, attended Eton and Oxford and now lives in suburban Japan. His perennial subject is the strange confluences and poignant idiosyncrasies born of our world’s dissolving borders. Very much like his transcultured existence, Iyer’s profession too, is a transcultured one, as he says in an interview, “*Since I spend much of my life in a Catholic temple in California, a nondescript suburb in rural Japan and in-between, in Tibet and Yemen..., I try to bring the perspective of those places (obliquely) into a New York based magazine that might otherwise draw its wisdom from Wall Street and Washington...*” (Iyer, 1996) While drawing the merits of being a traveler, Iyer further says, “*the rewards of being a traveler (the memories, the freedom, the new friends, the expansion of horizon, the constant refining and undermining of assumptions) combined with the rewards of being a writer (trying to make a clearing in the wilderness and to step out of the commotion and chaos of the world to bring it into a kind of order) squared!*” (Iyer, 1996)

Iyer's works problematizes the representation of identity in a borderless world. He unbrackets himself and his writing from such concrete ideas as class, race, gender, etc. Instead, the frames, borders and paradigms in his works are supplanted by such themes as globalization, diaspora, cyberspace, etc. --- all of which un-locates a location. In other words, this implies a convergence of cultures. To Iyer, the old motifs of the journey – home, departure, destination, have lost their reference in the lived experience of most travelers. Theoretically, while Iyer's works challenges the West constructed cartographical binaries, at the same time however, he also posits the viability of [re]-trac [sh] ing the Eurocentric world maps with new cartographies centered on the notion of globalization. This is primarily due to the fact that globalization "*does not operate equally for all the world's citizens... [as] some of the formerly dispossessed are being adjusted into the realms of information elect, while the other parts of the world are falling off the map. There remain massive disparities in the access to information -- along with it wealth and power -- both between and within countries.*" (Iyer, 1996) Further, Iyer's works does not dwell, as Robert Dixon puts it, "*in a culture rooted in a single place, but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries.*" (Said, 1983) Says Iyer, "*in the modern world, which I take to be an International Empire, the sense of home is not just divided, but scattered across the planet...*" (Clifford, 1992) He further adds in an interview, "*home is internal and that the only home I would have is whatever I carry around with me in the form of associations or friendships and beliefs*" (Iyer, 2001).

In most of his works, Iyer posits himself as a subject who exists in a state of perennial jet-lag, a wanderer in an exotic location sans any map, clocks or guidebooks. As he says in 'Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign', "*I feel, when jet-lagged, as if I am seeing the whole world through tears, or squinting; everything gets through to me, but with the wrong weight or meaning.*" He uses airports and airplanes as metaphors for the post-modern conditions of dislocation and homelessness. While he confesses to experiencing jet-lag, he never feels 'culture shock'. And although he has described himself as "*a global village on two legs*", he considers himself neither an expatriate nor exile. He views that "*an expat chooses to live a global life, [whereas] an exile is someone who is thrown into the situation, wrenched from home, and often longing to go back. An expat is often a person of relative privilege, able to fly from place to place, while an exile is often helpless, torn from the world they know and unable to get back there. The expat often rejoices to be away from the familiar, the exile may mourn that very state.*" Further he adds, "*Expats live liberated lives...an expat can make a person more aware of one's blessings.*" He also believes people can do magnificent things with the new global reality as he says, "*we just have to think about global living in a more soulful way which means having a global conscience and sense of responsibility.*"

Similarly, the notion of "roots" is often transcended in Iyer's works while he attempts at understanding culture(s). From a purely global perspective, he presences his acculturated domain within the Saidian notion of 'traveling theory' --- a "*non-totalized and a non- place*" (Iyer, 2001) entity. Said views that distance and alienation, as horrendous as they are to experience, nonetheless enable critical insight and originality of vision, forcing us to abandon fixed notions of identity as well as eschewing ideologies of mastery and nationalistic attachments. While subscribing to this view, we find Iyer articulating the Cliffordian contention that in today's global [-ized] world, travel and travel writing sharply brings into focus the "*constructed and disrupted historicities, sites of displacement, interference and interaction*" (Iyer, 2001). Iyer further seems to agree to

Clifford's argument that travel no longer implies simply the "ground or point of departure or arrival." 'The Global Soul...' justifies this contention. With the proliferation of sophisticated media technology, while there is a homogenization of the world culture, there persists heterogeneity of culture too, primarily because of the multiplicity of interpretations resulting out of interactions of audiences in different locations.

'The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home' is Pico Iyer's seminal work on this emerging global culture inhabited by global souls we find him wading through his own life as a man who cannot be bounded by an autochthonic image of longing nor that of a person being grounded in any one place. His predicament is that of a 'global soul' wading through a transnational village. In the said work, he begins his journey at the Los Angeles International airport, which for him is a pluralistic euphemism for capitalism. Airports, Iyer writes, "tells us what a community yearns to be as well as what it really is." (Iyer, 1989) Airports, as he makes us feel, not only introduce people to a country, but they also serve as points of departure. The hope of global soul, asserts Iyer, "*is that s/he can make the collection of his/her selves something greater than the whole; that diversity can leave him not a dissonance but a higher symphony.*" (Four Interviews, 1999) This is the idea he seems to convey when he quotes two of his friends having different views on multiculturalism, contesting the intended meaning of the term *in toto*. While for one, "*multiculturalism actually increases the distance between us*", it is "*about resisting*" for the other. A global soul, avers Iyer, needs to acknowledge that sometimes differences, and not similarities, are desirable. Blurring the gap between the center and the periphery, the inclusive and the marginalized, Iyer opines that "*a true cosmopolitan is not someone who's traveled a lot so much as someone who can appreciate what it feels like to be the other*" (Iyer, 1996). While centralizing the marginalized, Iyer, however, is acutely conscious of the division present in this global era, as he posits one group moving and living in a faster world, while the two-thirds are yet to make use of a telephone. The work, thus, celebrates those liminal spaces that transcend the borders of culture, country and time. Iyer comes across as a man who is familiar with but never at home in nearly every corner of the world and comfortable only when he doesn't quite know the language and customs of whatever place he finds for himself. His situation is such that in the countries where he chooses to live, he is by appearance, forever marked as an outsider; while in the country where he does appear to belong, he cannot speak the language, cannot even pronounce the name he was given at birth. In a sweep, Iyer addresses the dangers of half – knowledge, of the misapprehensions that can come from media exposure in the place of direct experience. Without the first hand contact we artificialize the real world, as in the case of the moneyed Japanese teenager, all Parisian *haute couture*, and half-English slang words. Iyer ends up with an ambivalent conclusion when he states that globalism may be just a shorthand description for a world of displaced peoples, of willing and unwilling refugees or it may refer to a world that resembles a giant website where people with common interests meet disregarding the tenets of religion or race. 'Global Soul...', thus, profiles a new kind of subject --- a deterritorialized world citizen – one who subscribes by choice or necessity to the view that as a fellow Eurasian "in – betweener" comments at a party in the Japanese countryside, "one country's not enough." When he speaks of Global Soul, he brings to the fore a picture of a schizophrenic persona, marked by alienation, or the Hiedeggerian '*unheimlich*' or '*unheimlichkeit*' – literally 'unhousedness' or 'not-at-home-ness' - --deftly contrasted against a fine sense of adventure and a healthy disregard for superpower jingoism.



‘Tropical Classical’ soars from the remotest places on the planet to the frontiers of contemporary culture and manners. In this work, we find him visiting a holy city in Ethiopia, where hooded worshippers practices a form of Christianity that has remained unchanged since the Middle Ages. He follows the bewilderingly complex route of Bombay’s *dabbawallahs*, who each day ferry 100,000 different lunches to 100,000 different workers. Iyer chats with the Dalai Lama and assesses books by Salman Rushdie and Cormac McCarthy. He employs his keen perception and inimitable wit to bear on the postmodern vogues for literary puffery, sexual gamesmanship and frequent flier miles.

Similarly, ‘Video Night in Kathmandu’ chronicles Iyer’s trips to Bali, Tibet, Nepal, China, the Philippines, Burma, Hong Kong, India, Thailand and Japan. The work shows a crossbreeding or cultural miscegenation of the East and the West, which seems to be accelerating because of the increased proliferation of the electronic media. His accounts are not only observations of this phenomenon, but also an analysis as he attempts to understand what he has encountered and attach deeper meaning to it. Without being prejudiced, Iyer approaches the idea of globalization, while substantiating his concept of a borderless construct. Each place he visits is profoundly influenced by the economics of popular culture and consumerism, most apparently from the United States. But at the same time, he is conscious of his tag as that of a “tourist”—which is apparently behind his unbiased observation and de-classified exposition of the places visited:

*“ [The danger as tourists is] that we begin to regard ourselves as beleaguered innocents and those we meet as shameless predators. To do so, however, is to ignore the great asymmetry that governs every meeting between tourist and local: that we are there by choice and they largely by circumstance; that we are traveling in the spirit of pleasure, adventure and romance, while they are mired in the more urgent business of trying to survive.”* (Iyer, 2001)

Iyer calls himself the fitting product of multiculturalism, a hybridized entity leading a de-territorialized existence. Unlike expat Indians, Iyer is not bogged down by the visceral and often painful urge to find one’s roots. His parents and most of his relatives live in India but his writings are hardly nostalgic. He, however, does not dismiss what he does not have – “*I admire those who have a strong sense of roots. It’s just that I don’t have that feeling in me.*” In an interview, he states, “*I feel less post-colonial than simply international or unaffiliated with no particular relation to India, America or Britain, but perhaps, the ability to look at all of them with something of the warmth of an insider and the discernment of a visitor.*” (Iyer, 2001) He presents himself as a ‘*typical product of movable sensibility ... living and working in a world that is itself increasingly small and increasingly mongrel*’ (Nederveen, 1995). He is a multinational soul on a multinational globe, one who has internalized global village.

It is his transculturative existence which helps him in absorbing the cultural diversities thereby obliquing/obliterating to a great extent, the traditional histories/historicities associated with a certain culture. Thus, we find him contrasting Toronto with Atlanta. While the multicultural Toronto has morphed into a harmonious realm of mixed ethnicities, languages and cultures, from a highly polarized world of French and English speakers, Atlanta, on the other hand, avers Iyer, is a racially divided site, as he witnessed during the Olympiad. Iyer voices this contrast when he makes one of his Toronto friends speak remark – “*The beauty of the present is that we can find ourselves in the company of cultures that we never expected to encounter otherwise*” – *whereas, in Atlanta, “amusement gives way to fear, hatred and mistrust...”* (Iyer, 1989). It is under such circumstances

where the polarities between ethnoconvergence and ethnocentrism are clearly marked, the global soul alter-locates himself without necessarily being drawn into such extremes. As he says, “*our shrinking world gave more and more of us a chance to see, in palpable, unanswerable ways, how much we had in common, and how much we could live... beyond petty allegiances and labels, outside the reach of nation-states.*” (Iyer, 2001).

Thus, Atlanta serves as a metaphor symptomatizing the problem of insularity of the American social psyche. The contradiction lies in the fact that while American culture has become synonymous with the world culture, it, however, is the one least prepared for the global future, in which multilingual with an acquaintance with several ways of life will be critical to success.

Iyer subscribes to the views of critical globalism to examine the process and effects of globalization. He neither celebrates nor excoriates it although he accepts that American culture has become synonymous with global culture. Nor does he view Globalism as a form of domination by the First World. He notices the growing influences of the Third World in London and California. He notes the importance of Japanese ideas and products on Western popular culture as proof that Asia has taken what the West had to offer, and developed it. “*If the nineteenth century was generally regarded as the European century and the twentieth as the American, the twenty-first, I thought, would surely be the Asian.*” (Iyer, 2001) Rather, he finds globalization as a phenomenon responsible for transculturation and creation of hybridized and hyphenated citizenships. Global souls, may be, thus, described as a world of displaced peoples, whose homeland is a tarmac. Says Iyer, “*this creature could be a person who had grown up in many cultures all at once – and so lived in the cracks between them --- or might be one who, though rooted in background, lived and worked on a globe that propelled him from tropic to snowstorm in three hours.*” (Iyer, 2001). He terms him as a “*citizen of the International Empire – made up of fusions (and confusions).*...” (Iyer, 2001). Iyer further substantiates this notion of multiple belonging by citing the example of the Japanese novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, who lives in London with a Scottish wife and a daughter “*who will be growing up in an England very likely full of Muslim fundamentalists.*” (Iyer, 1996) Alternately, it may reverberate in a friendly Torontonean face, in which the politico-geographical world is supplanted by the World Wide Web, where people with common interests meet devoid of racial, religious or cultural considerations.

While critiquing globalization, Iyer foregrounds hybridization and migration as the analogical corollary of it. Here, Iyer appears to echo Rouse’s opinion as “*we live in a confusing world, a world of crisscrossed economies, intersecting systems of meaning and fragmented identities. Suddenly the comforting modern imagery of nation-states and national languages, of coherent communities and consistent subjectivities, of dominant centers and distant margins no longer seems adequate.*” (Rouse, 1991). Subscribing to Bhabhaian contention of hybridized entity, Iyer, too, presents the transcultured subject as the representative protagonist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a metonym for one who is culturally interstitial. And as a product of polycultural discourse, Iyer can be best branded as ‘extra-territorial’ dealing extensively with such issues of postcolonial canon as hybridity, migrancy, *et al.*

Throughout his works, Iyer adopts a counter-essentialist stance in challenging the concept of single identity framed by such parameters as class, gender, race, etc. He rather presents himself as unlocatable. The criticality and the contradiction in his works, however, lie in the fact that even

though he detaches himself from home, roots, nation, language, *et al*, he finally, lands in a borderless cultural construct --- a 'single-knit entity' again --- in which his identity, roots, language, etc. are miscegenated beyond any point of identifiable definition. The speed and widening of global interconnectedness seem to have rendered history and geography obsolete, as the transnational flows of people and commodities, ideas and images, capital and information are claimed to dismantle such temporal and spatial barriers as nation and state. It, thus, appears that Pico Iyer finally succeeds in alter-locating and identifying himself within the domain of cultural aporia.

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